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PREPARATIONS FOR THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN: ACTION FOR EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Preliminary version of the 1994 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In its resolution 48/108, the General Assembly requested that a preliminary version of the 1994 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, which will be presented to the Assembly at its forty-ninth session, be provided to the Economic and Social Council through the Commission on the Status of Women. The present report contains a preliminary executive summary of the Survey, addressing its main themes: poverty, productive employment, and women in economic decision-making.

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INTRODUCTION

1. An up-to-date version of the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development was requested by the General Assembly in its resolutions 44/77 of 8 December 1989 and 44/171 of 19 December 1989. It is to be presented to the General Assembly in 1994 and, in accordance with Commission on the Status of Women resolution 36/8 of 20 March 1992, will be one of the principal documents for the Fourth World Conference on Women. By its resolution 48/108, the Assembly decided that a preliminary version of the Survey would be provided to the Economic and Social Council, through the Commission on the Status of Women, at its 1994 session. The present report is the result of that request. It is an abbreviated executive summary of the survey, emphasizing the initial findings on the main themes. A more elaborated executive summary will be presented to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1994.

2. A central argument of the 1994 update of the World Survey is that the advancement of women is a necessary condition to achieving the goals of development. This reflects changing views on the gender dimension of development. There is increasing recognition that all development strategies should be based on gender analysis, which has proven to be among the most powerful tools for understanding the workings of the economy and society. The new understanding requires an integrated framework for the study of gender relations, which includes households, education and training systems, employment structures, decision-making institutions, and the world economy and its restructuring. An essential conclusion is that, rather than being a consequence of development, gender equality can bring about profound changes in the socio-economic organization of societies.

3. To accomplish this task, it is necessary to avoid sectoral approaches. The Survey accordingly focuses on three issues central to development in which gender factors are proving to be critical for the formulation of successful policies and programmes. They are poverty, productive employment, and participation in economic decision-making. In the final version of the Survey, in addition to the central theme chapters, these issues will be examined in terms of key sectoral analyses. The specialized chapters will have been prepared by various organizations of the United Nations system working in concert.

I. POVERTY

4. Poverty remains a major challenge for the entire international community. Its eradication is one of the three themes for the World Summit on Social Development, is on the agenda of the World Conference on Population and Development, is a major objective of the International Development Strategy for the Fourth United Nations Development Decade and is a significant component of Agenda 21. It is one of the critical areas of concern to be addressed in the platform of action to be adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women.

5. Gender factors explain why women and men experience poverty in different ways and why women are disproportionately represented in the poorest sections of

the population. Examining the gender dynamics of poverty helps to increase understanding of poverty itself and can suggest new policies to confront it.

6. Gender analysis suggests that, at the microlevel, poverty must be seen in terms of the household. It recognizes that poverty is essentially a consumption issue. People are poor because they lack sufficient goods and services to reach an acceptable standard of living. The goods and services are consumed within households.

7. In the past there was a tendency to focus on income as the main factor in poverty, on the assumption that remunerated income was the means to meet basic needs. That approach understated the contribution of unremunerated individual actors within the household and the consequences of pooling remunerated and unremunerated contributions as a means of coping with low levels of consumption. There was a tendency to make women's contributions invisible in the household economy, which was assumed to be based on the contributions of a "breadwinner", generally assumed to be a man. This led to a neglect of the non-monetized components of household survival strategies. Since the main concern was with the monetized economy and since the poor - especially women - function mostly in non-monetized sectors, resources tended to be targeted to male household members who are more involved in monetized labour. In this way, many poverty eradication strategies may miss their target.

8. The household functions on the basis of implicit contracts between household members governing the distribution of food and work and on the basis of specific responsibilities entailed in making a living and providing care for family members. One's status in the household defines one's claims, obligations, resources and responsibilities in relation to other household members. When tasks are not equally shared, women are in most disadvantaged position because of their dual need to make a living and to provide care for the other members. Resources within the household are not shared equally. Individuals share costs and benefits disproportionately according to their sex, age and relationship to the head of household. Households can involve different living arrangements - a two-generation family living under one roof; an extended family of several generations; a household made up of unrelated persons brought together for various reasons such as scarcity of resources or housing.

9. Not all resources are shared within a household. The maintenance of networks and mutual obligations and support between kin does not require residence or physical proximity: a family that has migrated will remit income to family members left behind; parents will support children not residing with them as long as the children are in school or lack sufficient income of their own.

10. Household coping strategies have a gender component, based on a largely sexual division of labour. To reduce the risk of having no means to purchase goods or services, households tend to increase the number of household members, send members out to work in remunerated sectors or increase production within the household. One negative result of these strategies is the withdrawal of children - most often girls - from the educational system to earn income or to relieve older female members of the household of caretaking tasks so that the latter can work in remunerated sectors. Another - especially in urban areas -

is increased pressure on available space, as more and more persons come to live on the same premises.

11. Global structural adjustment has had an impact on the household. Initially, stabilization programmes have a negative impact. The elimination of subsidies for key consumer goods force households either to go without or to find additional sources of remunerated income. Micro-studies have shown that it is the women of the households who undertake to find means of maintaining consumption levels. Over the longer term, the elimination of unprofitable enterprises has meant that men have increasingly lost their jobs. It is often the women in the household who have gone into the labour force - usually in the informal sector - to make up for the lost income.

12. In an increasing number of cases, the male "breadwinner" leaves the household to seek work elsewhere or because of an inability to cope. If that person remits earnings to the household, the household's consumption may increase. However, usually the household loses an income earner. The net result is a female-headed household. The main difficulty for a female-headed household is that the person who performs the remunerated tasks has to perform the non-remunerated tasks as well.

13. Even when the household has both male and female adult members, the situation may be unfavourable to women. A rigid division of responsibilities within the home considerably narrows women's opportunities in the productive sphere and in public life. For example, the sphere of reproduction is still assumed to be women's exclusively. Since women's only asset is their time and labour, reproductive responsibilities make them less mobile and their investment in the labour market tends to be lower. This has had an impact on the position of women outside the household, affecting their access to the labour market, credit and natural resources and even determining the extent of the command they have over their own labour. Moreover, women, especially in developing countries, do not always have control over the returns of their labour, because husbands and senior males have non-reciprocal rights over the labour of wives and female members.

14. There is increasing evidence that there is a strong correlation between female-headed households and poverty. First, female-headed households often carry a higher dependency burden. Secondly, female-headed households are economically vulnerable because women have lower average earnings, fewer assets and less access to remunerative jobs and productive resources such as land, capital and technology than men. Because women also have to fulfil home production or domestic functions, they suffer more constraints on their time and mobility. As a result, they have shown a preference for working fewer hours for pay and for "choosing" lower paying jobs - jobs that are more compatible with childcare and domestic chores. Finally, they may encounter discrimination in access to jobs or resources.

15. Female hardship contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty, since women's roles as mothers and their ability to manage scarce resources are likely to have important consequences for the ability of their children to escape poverty in the future.

16. There is little evidence that the market will eliminate poverty, but an extended period of economic growth might produce sufficient employment to attenuate the effects of poverty. In general, the eradication of poverty requires a public response. The response can be made by different actors using different means.

17. Public policy to eliminate poverty must be addressed to the household. In practice, social welfare policy is based on the household as a unit for the calculation of benefits. However, a wider application would be to seek to provide assets to household members to increase their capacity to contribute to remunerated consumption and to home production. For example, educational programmes should target the household members who undertake reproductive tasks that are essential for maintaining the microeconomy.

II. PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT

18. An increasing percentage of women are entering the formal labour force and the largely unrecorded informal sector. At the same time, an increasing proportion of men are experiencing patterns of employment that are closer to those historically followed by women. These changes are a lagged consequence of the increased opportunities for women to obtain education and training on an equal footing with men and of a prolonged period of global structural adjustment.

19. While people tend to consume in households, they earn in the formal labour force as individuals. In some types of employment, the household and the market merge. In farms and small-scale commerce, for example, the boundaries between formal employment and the informal sector blur. In most formal employment, however, work takes place at a location other than the household.

20. For the past decade the world has experienced a significant growth in female labour force participation. However, the main emphasis should be not on the participation rate but on changing participation over the life cycle, analysing the new patterns of participation of both men and women. Global changes in the world economy have had a particular impact on employment patterns and opportunities. One of the emerging trends is the high demand for a well-educated labour force with flexible skills; another is the increasing share of part-time jobs. Such tendencies affect the size and characteristics of the labour force. These new developments have affected women's position on the labour market.

21. A life course approach shows that women's employment histories have differed from those of men. It appears that these differences are beginning to become less acute. It is possible to construct a life-cycle profile from data which follow the labour market experience of the same group of women or men using cohort data, combining the experience of successive cross-sections of the population. For example, the population of women and men aged 15-19 in one year will be the population aged 20-24 five years later.

22. An examination of employment in the informal sector and in high growth areas in the formal sector, such as export processing zones, communications and

other modern service sectors, suggests that women are becoming a preponderant part of the labour force in key areas. In contrast, male employment may be declining, as economic sectors which have been the basis of their employment decline. This is in contrast to previous periods when men would move into growth areas, displacing women, if necessary. The current development reflects the fact that women have been achieving equality in access to education in more parts of the world and that their perceived skills are valued in the growth sectors. Moreover, women are beginning to run small- and medium-scale enterprises, as owners and managers. The consequences of these changes have not been fully explored.

23. However, although women form the basis of the labour force and entrepreneurial activities in certain key areas, they are not well-represented in top management or larger enterprises.

III. PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC DECISION-MAKING

24. For women, equality in economic decision-making means sharing economic power on equal terms with men. It implies that women have access to the means, opportunities and processes which permit them to be full and equal participants in the economy.

25. As noted above, data on the past 20 years show that the proportion of female workers and the rate of growth of female employment are increasing almost everywhere and in all sectors, that women represent an important percentage of middle-level managers and that in many regions women are entering the third level of education at a rate that will nearly close the gap between men and women. Moreover, women are increasingly entering fields of study that were previously the domain of men. Despite these trends, however, women are still largely absent from positions of economic decision-making.

26. In comparison with men, the participation of women in top management of large private and public enterprises and on the boards of trade unions, professional organizations and similar institutions is a relatively new phenomenon. The proportion of women in such positions is very low and is growing at a rate far below that for overall trends in formal employment. Even in traditionally female-dominated professions and sectors, women are in secondary positions relative to men. Many factors affect women's access to decision-making positions and how women adapt and perform in such positions. Some derive from the stereotyped gender roles that have been assigned to women, which are reinforced by education, custom, rules and procedures. These factors influence women's careers from their entry into organizations and work to limit their prospects for advancement.

27. The delayed effect of low representation in middle management in the past may be the most important obstacle faced by women. It reduces the likelihood that women will have equal opportunities to reach top management. Studies show that the rate of increase in the proportion of women in high positions has been very slow and that at the current rate of increase, in most developed countries, it will be 475 years before women reach equality with men as senior managers.

28. Women are confronted with diverse and difficult factors restricting their vertical mobility within large enterprises. The factors which are gender-based are embedded in employment rules, regulations and performance evaluations. Since organizational norms are largely formulated around the interests of men as employees and employers, they do not reflect women's preferences and style. This can lead to the sexual harassment of women, their exclusion from opportunities for skill and professional development, their exclusion from formal and informal networks and the undervaluation of their skills. In turn this produces what has been often termed the "glass ceiling", an invisible but impassable barrier that prevents women from rising professionally upwards, regardless of their education and experience.

29. While a lack of participation by women in top management is characteristic of large enterprises, women entrepreneurs are making an increasingly important contribution to new start-ups in small- and medium-sized enterprises and are also entering a broader range of business fields, world wide. They often form the majority of small entrepreneurs but have less access than men to such support services as credit, training and technical assistance. The lack of access to resources, including credit, is a key constraint which is linked to inheritance laws and matrimonial property. Other factors are a hostile environment and a lack of networks and supportive services, which are essentially created by men, for men.

30. The advancement of women to economic decision-making positions needs public policy support as well as private support, at both the micro and macro levels, throughout the world. It should address the early paths of socialization, the modalities of educational and professional choices, discriminatory laws, administrative and organizational rules and procedures as well as behaviour.

31. There is increasing evidence that if women entrepreneurs are given access to credit and technology, they apply managerial skills that derive from their experience in managing both their productive and reproductive roles, which give them a higher probability of success. There is also evidence that women, given opportunities to assume increasingly responsible positions in large enterprises, can apply new approaches to management which can improve the performance of those enterprises.